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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002226

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ ELECTORAL MACHINE KICKS INTO HIGH GEAR

REF: A. CARACAS 2195

- [1B.](#) CARACAS 2208
- [1C.](#) CARACAS 2201
- [1D.](#) IRR 6 902 0046 08

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Classified By: Daniel Lawton, Acting Political Counselor,
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: President Chavez' government and the "Yes" campaign are increasingly one and the same in the run-up to the December 2 referendum on Chavez' proposed, sweeping changes to the constitution. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) is injecting significant personnel and resources into the "Yes" campaign to ensure a large pro-government turn-out. It is also framing the December 2 constitutional referendum as a vote for the domestically popular Chavez and his "socialist revolution" while trying to discredit reform opponents as "coup-mongers". Although the "No" campaign has made some inroads in recent days, Chavez' "Yes" campaign still has far more resources, people, and means to influence and deliver voters to the polls. End Summary.

Government = Campaign

[12.](#) (SBU) President Chavez tapped senior government officials to lead his United Socialist Party of Venezuela's (PSUV's) "Yes" campaign in October. This "Zamora Command", named for 19th century Venezuelan land reform proponent and general Ezequiel Zamora, directs the efforts of similar state and local "Yes" campaign committees. These local efforts are, in turn, largely led by pro-Chavez state and local officials. Vice President Jorge Rodriguez heads the national Zamora Command with the help of the Foreign Minister, Information Minister, a State Governor and the President of the Chavez created Telesur TV network in addition to a number of vice ministers and National Assembly deputies. Rodriguez claimed on November 19 that 5,600 "Yes" campaign events had been conducted since November 2.

[13.](#) (C) Various central government ministries are using personnel and resources to get out the "Yes" vote. Government employees told us that they are expected to participate in "Yes" marches or risk losing their jobs. The BRV is also putting pressure on government employees (over two million voters) to vote "Yes" or risk losing their jobs, according to leaders of the pro-Chavez Patria Para Todos

(PPT) party. Government ministries are also directly involved in organizing pro-reform workshops and forums. For example, the Ministry of Light Industry and Commerce organized almost 1400 forums during a recent 12-day period covering the entire country. The Ministry of Culture is paying for print ads that explain how Article 87 of the proposed reform will benefit artisans and promise a census of cultural laborers to include them in the social security system.

¶4. (C) According to DAO contacts, the armed forces also appear to be subject to political pressure. In direct violation of Article 328 of the Venezuela Constitution, Venezuelan military personnel were coerced by government representatives into participating in pro-government marches with threat to remove them from their assignments or from military service altogether if they did not. Red T-shirts and hats were distributed throughout military units a day or two prior to government demonstrations and personnel were required to sign a list that sufficed as proof of participation. Payment for participating in the marches was automatically deposited into personnel payrolls and was indicated simply as a 'bono' ('bonus' in Spanish) on paystubs (Ref D).

Milk in Every Refrigerator

¶5. (C) The BRV also appears to be replenishing subsidized food stocks in its government-run MERCAL supermarkets and holding a large number of open air "Mega-MERCALS" in an effort to alleviate growing popular frustration with shortages of basic foodstuffs. The BRV gave away free milk at the MERCAL stores during the weekend of November 17; milk is a particularly scarce commodity of late due to unrealistic price controls and increased demand. The December 2 vote also falls conveniently around the time that most Venezuelans

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receive their Christmas bonuses, usually one to three months salary.

Government Air Time

¶6. (SBU) Government-run media outlets are also providing the "Yes" camp plenty of free air time. Chavez is making liberal use of mandatory "cadena" broadcasts on all free-to-air TV and radio airwaves (approximately 36 minutes of airtime per day). In addition, government networks covered Chavez' lengthy speech to "Yes" campaign workers live the night of November 22 and will almost certainly continue to air similar "Yes" campaign events. Radio spots are aimed at promoting the "sweeteners" in the reform package. One features a fortyish casual laborer praising the social security pension and paid vacation that ostensibly he would get from a revised constitution. Another government spot depicts a twenty-something woman saying she's "loyal" and can go to university because of socialism, not her family's wealth.

Attack, Attack, Attack

¶7. (C) Vice President Rodriguez recently lashed out in the local media at polls showing gains for the "No" camp as a "manipulation" by the critical cable news outlet Globovision. He also accused media outlets of not giving equal coverage to "Yes" events. Rodriguez asked that the "No" bloc be investigated for excessive use of print and radio media. The "Yes" camp is also trying to discredit opponents to Chavez' reform package as disloyal lackeys to an international (usually American) conspiracy. The "Yes" camp sponsored a 16-page large format color comic insert for the popular

Sunday edition of "Ultimas Noticias" that featured a scrawny devil trying to dissuade a multicultural group of Venezuelans from voting for the reforms. A frustrated Uncle Sam looks on. On November 21, the pro-government daily "Vea" accused Fedecameras of trying to foment violent "adventure politics."

The day before, "Vea" warned that the Ambassador is an expert in "long soft coups" and accused him of trying to start a "rose revolution" in Venezuela.

Comment

18. (C) Despite the opposition's increased activism in recent weeks, President Chavez and the "Yes" camp have more people, money, and means to influence voters and get them to the polls on election day than the opposition parties combined. Nevertheless, they may be concerned with reports that support for the reforms continues to poll at a level below support for the Venezuelan president himself. Not surprisingly, the "Yes" camp is making every effort to transform the debate into another referendum on Chavez and his "revolution," appealing directly to Chavez' substantial base of low income voters. Although reform opponents, particularly the student movement, have eroded some support for these sweeping constitutional changes, the intensification of the BRV's efforts to promote the reforms shows clearly that the "No" camp still faces a daunting electoral challenge.

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